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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, March 20, 1935.

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Subject: "Pie-Plant Pointers." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry and the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Among the favorite early-spring foods of any good American is that juicy, pink stalk called rhubarb or pie-plant. That stalk with its refreshing tart taste and its delicate color made the favorite spring pies of our grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' day. In fact, it was so popular for this purpose that New England housewives gave it the familiar name of "pie-plant." You might suppose, from our fondness for rhubarb that it was one of our native plants. But not at all. It was an emigrant that made good, that was joyfully "naturalized" as soon as it reached our shores. Rhubarb's native soil was Russia and other northern parts of Europe where it grew wild. I don't know who brought it across the Atlantic, but once settled on our shores, it received a hearty welcome and has been a favorite in home gardens in the North ever since.

This hardy plant likes a cool climate. Our garden advisor, W. R. B., tells me that it thrives only when its roots can freeze in winter, that it needs to be far enough north so that the ground will freeze four inches deep during the cold weather.

Here are a few other garden suggestions from W. R. B. for anyone who is growing pie-plant. He says that any time now is a good time to lift and divide the roots of a plant that has been several years in the same place in your garden. You see, if the plant remains too long in one position, the roots become thick and the stalks "spindle." To prevent this, you should divide the roots every few years. And early spring is the proper time to do it.

Now, if you want long delicate stalks, a barrel with the end knocked off will help you. Just as the rhubarb leaves begin to emerge from the ground, set this open barrel over the plant. In striving toward the light, the plant will form long, and delicately colored stems.

W.R.B. says that rhubarb needs plenty of fertilizer -- a rich garden soil. And it needs a moderate amount of water. It won't stand much shade -- likes the spring sunshine.

Well, so much for garden pointers. Remember that the roots need to freeze in the winter; that you should separate the roots every few years; and that the plant does best in rich soil, in a sunny spot, on well-drained land with moderate watering.

Now for some cooking pointers. W. R. B., thinks rhubarb and strawberries cooked together make one of the finest combinations man ever tasted. He has an idea that if more housewives put up rhubarb and strawberries each spring, we'd have more happy homes the year round.



Well, since he has brought up the subject, let's go into the matter of cooking and canning this popular plant. First, if you have any choice, select the young and colorful stalks. The first cutting has better flavor and color, is more tender and juicy than the older stalks. As the rhubarb grows older, the stems become more acid. Wash each stalk carefully and trim ends. But don't remove the skin. That skin gives the beautiful color to the cooked rhubarb and also helps hold the shape of each piece. Cut the stalks in pieces about a half or an inch long.

Because rhubarb is so full of juice, you never need to add any water when you cook it. And because it is tart, you will probably like quite a little sweetening. Those two cooking points are just common sense.

The easiest way to prepare rhubarb is in sauce. You may have a special way of making sauce. Some people I know just mix two parts of the fruit with one part of sugar and cook it very gently over a low fire until the liquid cooks out and forms a sirup.

The food experts at the Bureau of Home Economics think that an even better way is to make a thick sirup first, and then drop the rhubarb pieces into it and cook until tender. This takes only a few minutes.

When you have your oven going for some other food, you can make baked rhubarb. It looks especially attractive if you use a glass baking dish. Butter a covered baking dish. Then spread a layer of rhubarb over the bottom, sprinkle on a layer of sugar, then add another layer of rhubarb and so on until the dish is filled. Sprinkle sugar over the top. Then add small pieces of butter and the grated rind of a lemon. Some people prefer cinnamon or nutmeg flavor to the lemon. Cover the dish and bake slowly until the fruit is tender. Long, slow baking gives rhubarb a rich, red color. For variety, you can bake rhubarb and banana together.

If you want to make the most of this spring favorite, you'll use it for more good things than sauce or pie. It makes delicious conserve, combined with orange, lemon and blanched almonds. (Add the nuts at the end of the cooking.) Then, you can use it in place of apple in that fine bread-crumb pudding known as "Brown Betty." Rhubarb also makes delicious tapioca pudding, sherbet, tarts, gelatin sponge and shortcake.

Rhubarb stalks that are a little too old for sauce or pie, you can use for juice. And if you have more rhubarb than you can use at this season, put it up either as sauce or juice to use the rest of the year. That tart flavor that most of us enjoy so much at this season will be just as welcome next winter -- or during the summer and fall. Rhubarb juice is delicious in cooling drinks for summer. It makes good sherbet and gelatin desserts. And it is excellent in pudding sauces. For example, it makes delicious foamy sauce. Just combine this tart juice with sugar and with the stiffly beaten white of egg.

Now just let's take time to go over the main points about making the most of rhubarb. First, choose the young, fresh, colorful stalks for either cooking or canning. Second, use the older stalks for juice. Third, add little or no water for cooking. Fourth, cook gently and never overcook. Fifth, use this spring food in many different ways and the family won't tire of it.



Just one word of caution. Good as the stems of this plant are, the leaves are poisonous. They contain a large amount of oxalic acid. So never try to make greens of the leaves if you want to keep well and happy. The only good way of utilizing the leaves that I know is to use them to shine your darkened aluminum kettles. The very acid that makes the leaf poisonous makes it brighten aluminum.



